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REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON ITS TWENTY-SIXTH SESSION

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: J. A. MWANIKI (Kenya)

Chapter ____ . DEMOGRAPHIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

C. Social statistics and indicators

1. The Commission considered item 9 (c) of its agenda at its 444th meeting, on 8 February 1991. It had before it the following documents:

(a) Report of the Secretary-General on progress made in the development of a co-ordinated United Nations system data base for selected social statistics and indicators of common interest and the development of related national data bases (E/CN.3/1991/20);

(b) Report of the Secretary-General on general development and integration of methodological work, including experience and progress made in international classifications (E/CN.3/1991/24);

(c) Report of the Secretary-General containing updated information on the work of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat (E/CN.3/1991/30).

2. The Commission expressed its great appreciation of the technical quality of the reports and discussed a number of technical issues raised in them. The complex nature of social phenomena and the considerable skills and resources necessary to measure them reliably were particularly emphasized. It was agreed that the efficient organization of data sources and availability of the necessary skills in countries were key factors for the success of monitoring. The necessary mobilization and organization of country resources would have to be tackled on a country-by-country basis. It also agreed that one of the key requirements, which was very difficult to meet, was the organization and interpretation of the complex statistics needed in the reports, which could reach a wide and non-specialized audience.

3. The Commission considered in some detail the appropriate role and orientation of social indicators programmes at the national, regional and international levels in the context of practical requirements for monitoring, planning and evaluation. The Commission welcomed the comments of the Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on policy applications at the country level of indicators in fields of concern to UNICEF and to other organizations of the United Nations system. The Commission agreed that considerable effort was needed to implement indicator programmes responsive to the highest priority social concerns and objectives established and approved by Governments in key international forums and within the framework of the International Development Strategy for the Fourth United Nations Development Decade. Such programmes should comprise a mix of data collection activities and techniques as well as methods of analysis, compilation and co-ordination and would require technical co-operation support for many developing countries.

4. Programmes should be geared to operational requirements in countries to support policy decisions and programme implementation in addition to monitoring. Data should be provided on a nearly continuous basis and be up to date. The Commission agreed that programmes should be geared to providing a selected number of core series in social statistics. However, it was essential that they be collected, compiled and analysed in sufficient detail, with possibilities of disaggregation by small geographical areas and special population groups, to show real progress and bring out issues in the social fields. It was recognized that general averages and estimates had limited uses and could be misleading. The Commission strongly agreed that composite or unitary indexes of social progress were technically unsound and inappropriate for international comparisons.

5. Several members expressed the view that much more work was needed to clarify the statistical implications and better develop the methods needed to measure the social goals and objectives referred to in the reports before the Commission. Some members expressed scepticism about whether the goals and objectives adopted in international forums were realistic. In that context, the representative of the World Bank expressed regret that more use had not been made of the framework and methods developed by the Bank for measuring living standards.

6. The Commission agreed that the programme of pilot studies referred to in the report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/1991/20) would provide practical experience and an assessment at the country level of statistical gaps that the monitoring

programme could address as well as technical parameters of a full scale programme. That, in turn, would provide a sound basis for focusing the programme on core data requirements and indicators and determining realistically the steps to be taken to ensure that needs were met. The Commission expressed its appreciation of the additional valuable experience provided by the case studies described by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in its report submitted to the Commission for consideration under item 9 (d) (E/CN.3/1991/21).

7. The Commission endorsed the programme for monitoring achievement of social goals in the 1990s. It agreed that the technical, organizational and policy challenges posed by monitoring requirements were formidable but was of the opinion that action on a major programme along the lines described in the report was timely and urgent and that the pilot studies should be implemented as quickly as possible. The adverse trends in human development in many countries in the past decade had drawn new attention to the need for better monitoring and indicators and demonstrated clearly that urgent action was necessary. New opportunities and new awareness of social concerns and disparities could support and sustain a sound monitoring programme. The Commission noted a number of regional activities and initiatives already under way which provided essential experience and momentum in the field of social statistics and indicators, such as the new annual social report on Latin America and the Caribbean, paralleling the annual economic report of ECLAC. The social report would provide, for the first time, regular and timely indicators for the region on such pressing issues as employment, distribution of income, poverty, children and youth.

8. The Commission stressed the importance of a concrete and pragmatic approach to monitoring; it fully appreciated the challenges involved, however. Data collection programmes and country capacities should not be overloaded nor should new programmes be undertaken which might duplicate, overlap or compete with existing ones. The Commission agreed that it was essential to carefully select priorities in statistical work and make the fullest use of data generated by the National Household Survey Capability Programme (NHSCP), the Demographic and Health Survey programme (DHS) sponsored by USAID, the Pan-Arab Project for Child Development (PAPCHILD) executed by the League of Arab States, the Inter-Agency Food and Nutritional Surveillance Programme (IFNS) sponsored by UNICEF, FAO and WHO and the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) and Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) project, both executed by the World Bank.

9. The Commission discussed in detail the importance of full co-ordination at three levels: between institutions within a country; among international organizations at the country and international levels; and between countries and international organizations. Those efforts should involve, inter alia, co-ordination and agreement in choice and technical specification of indicators for monitoring. The Commission agreed that countries should take the initiative to ensure adequate co-ordination in indicators collection and analysis activities at the national level but noted the problems faced by developing countries trying to ensure such co-ordination. It noted with concern that national statistical services had to deal with a multiplicity of multilateral and bilateral agencies interested in statistical and monitoring issues, many of which dealt directly with other substantive ministries in their Governments. Sectoral programmes tended to

call for a wide and proliferating range of indicators that often overlapped and were not standardized technically. In spite of those obstacles, a number of successful social statistics programmes were cited in which technical co-operation had greatly contributed to improved social statistics. The Commission welcomed the possibilities for improved co-ordination described in the report on monitoring.

10. The Commission welcomed the work of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, in co-operation with and with support from many other organizations, on statistics on special population groups, including disabled persons, the elderly, and young people. It expressed its particular appreciation of the contribution made by the Statistical Office to focusing world-wide attention and development efforts on statistics on disabled persons, including the publication of the Disability Statistics Compendium, and the elderly and noted with satisfaction the support for the work on disability statistics expressed by the representative of Disabled Persons International. The Commission agreed that statistics on disabled persons was a particularly complex field in which countries were anxious to have international support and guidance and welcomed the proposal of the Statistical Office to convene, with WHO, an expert group to review applications of the WHO International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH).

11. The Commission expressed strong support for the work of the Statistical Office in the development of statistics on women. The work included methodology, compilation and training for measuring women's contribution in the economy and the informal sector, drawing on the framework of national accounts, and technical co-operation.

12. The Commission expressed particular appreciation of the extent of co-ordination and collaboration achieved in the United Nations system in the programmes on women's statistics and special population groups. It noted that those programmes provided invaluable experience and inputs to the monitoring programme; it fully supported the continuation and further development of those programmes.

Action by the Commission

13. The Commission:

(a) Commended the Statistical Office, UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO for the progress achieved in technical and organizational planning for the programme for social monitoring in the 1990s;

(b) Welcomed the interest and progress of both developed and developing countries in improving their social statistics and indicators suitable for monitoring social progress and objectives and guiding policy;

(c) Endorsed the overall effort to develop a programme for monitoring social goals in the 1990s and recommended the fastest possible action to implement the programme on a pragmatic basis, with a view to ensuring initial results within two to three years;

(d) Recommended that the lead offices in the social monitoring effort intensify their efforts to ensure the broadest possible national, regional and international participation and contributions to the programme, consistent with ensuring focused priority on a limited set of practical statistical objectives;

(e) Suggested that the participating organizations and countries work together to ensure the greatest possible cost-effectiveness in data collection, tabulation and analysis for the desired indicators, and in co-ordinated international social reporting;

(f) Endorsed the work programme and activities of the Statistical Office on statistics on women and on special population groups and recommended the maximum possible support for countries interested in developing their statistics in that field;

(g) Requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Commission at its twenty-seventh session a report on the programme to monitor the achievement of social goals in the 1990s and related methodological work.
